Chapter III

SERICULTURE AND SILK WEAVING IN ASSAM: PRE-COLONIAL TO END OF BRITISH RULE.

The art of sericulture and silk weaving has a long history in the world. As far as evidence goes, silk culture seems to have originated in China. The Chinese historians trace back the use of the product of the silk worm to the period of the myths. Silk is mentioned as being used in the making of sounding chords for the musical instruments called *kin* which was a sort of lyre with 27 chords. Many fascinating legends are woven around the discovery of silk, but none is as widely accepted as the story of the Chinese queen his-ling shih or Silingihi, wife of the emperor W'hang, who ruled over China about 2,500 B.C. According to the legend, the Empress was moving in her garden one day when she saw some tiny insects feeding on mulberry leaves. A few days later the worms had grown very big. She continued watching the process until the cocoons were spun by the silkworms. The 14 year old queen carried the cocoons to the palace where she preserved them until moths emerged. One day she accidentally dropped pierced cocoons into a hot-water bath. When she tried to retrieve them, a shimmering white mass of yarn emerged. The Empress had discovered silk. According to another legend, narrated by Leotard, silk was discovered earlier by Seling-chi

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2. P. Venkatanarasaih, *Sericulture in India*, (New Delhi, 1992) p.4
the wife of the celebrated Emperor Huang Ti. The Empress is credited to have invented the loom by 2640 B.C. The deep devotion of the Empress to the development of the silk industry had such a wide impact on the masses that after her death, altars were raised to her memory and she was worshipped as the 'Goddess of the silkworms'. According to Cicilia Ng, from this time onward, silk is frequently mentioned in Chinese ancient literary texts. It is mentioned in an ancient literary text, the *classic of Odes* and quotes, "... Warp and weft are empty..." and Zhu yi's annotation explains that 'warp holds the horizontal line and Weft the vertical one'. Besides the loom is alluded to in numerous poems of different dynasties. The most famous one is a long poem describing the story of Mulan who joins the army in her father's name. The poem starts with a scene where Mulan is working at the loom. Mulan is weaving a cloth, the sound of the warp cannot be heard instead there is only Mulan sighing... ...”

An interesting observation that Cicilia Ng makes in this context is that all spinsters (from which the word spinner is derived,) are women in all mythologies. Incidentally, the word spinster is used to refer to a single unmarried woman, which goes to show the involvement of women in the craft. The technology of spinning and weaving is always created by a goddess, for example *Arachne* in Greek mythology, *chih Niu* in Chinese mythology, *Nert* in Egyptian mythology etc. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the word techne can
be traced back to the Indo-European root teks, which means "to weave". In fact weaving is the only technology that man admits has been created by women.

From China as a centre, the industry is said to have radiated to other parts of the world including India via Tibet by about 140 B.C. through the famous silk route or Silk Road. This was the name given to the numerous mountain passes and ways, known as Duars which exist between Assam and Tibet through Bhutan. Across this route, a considerable amount of trade was carried on from early times. While the exports from Assam consisted of lac, muga silk, endi cloth among other articles, the Assamese used to receive woolen cloths, gold dust, rock salt, Chinese silk and Tibetan smoking pipes. The other view is that mulberry and silk culture had originated in the lower slopes of the Himalayas and as such they might have originated either in China or India or in both the countries at the same time.

The date of introduction of silk manufacture in Assam or the tradition of silk weaving in Sualkuchi cannot definitely be ascertained. However historical records point to the fact that the Katonis or the rearers of the Pat silk entered Assam in the 12th A.D. It appears then that this craft flourished under

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4 Cecelia Ng, "When Cyberfeminism Meets Chinese Philosophy, Computer, Weaving and Women", in Cecelia Ng et al. (ed.), Gender, Technology and Development, September - December 2003, Vol 7, No 3 (New Delhi, 2003) p 281
6 Prabin Baishya, The silk Industry of Assam A case Study in the Sualkuchi Cluster, NEDfi, 2003
See also, P. Venkatanarasaih, op.cit., p 4
the Pala kings. During the time of the Assamese poet, Sri Chandra Bharati, a contemporary of King Nara Narayan of Cooch Behar, weaving of pat silk was an established practice in Sualkuchi.\textsuperscript{7}

It is evident that Assam had a high reputation for silk production in the world. According to B, K. Baruah, “The Mohammadan historians noticed that the silks of Assam were excellent and resembled those of China. Travernier writes of Assam silk “produced on trees” The royal presents which Hamsavega carried as gifts from Bhaskaravarman to Harsha included “silken cloths (ksaumani) pure as the moon’s light. Dukula (broad cloth) was the usual name for the finest Ksauma and it is referred to in the Bargaon Grant as being used for flags. Bana too mentions that the Abhoga umbrella sent to Harsha by Bhaskarvarmana was wrapped in Dukula. The Arthashastra in the chapter on royal treasury mentions the places of manufacture of the best kinds of dukula. Kautilya also refers to the varieties of fibrous garments known as patrorna and remarked that which is produced in the country of Suvarnakundya (Assam)\textsuperscript{8} was “red as the sun, as soft as the surface of the gem, woven while the threads were very wet and of uniform or mixed texture and was considered the best. It is therefore evident

\textsuperscript{7} Kanak Lal Baruah Bahadur., “The Weaving Master”, Letter, to the second secretary Government of Assam, Shillong, March no 13.,(Assam,1914)

\textsuperscript{8} B.K. Baruah citing literary evidence from the Arthashastra has identified Suvarnakundya as Assam, See B.K. Baruah., op.cit., p.104
that Assam even in the 4th century was celebrated for *dukula* fit to be kept in the royal treasury."

Aside from historical references, an interesting Assamese legend relates that a poor Brahmin widow gave birth to three sons after the death of her husband and was excommunicated by the society for her alleged unchastity. In her distress, she sought help from a holy hermit, who taking pity on her, changed her three sons into three silk worms, viz, *eri, muga and pat*. This could perhaps be interpreted to mean that only women of the lower castes/classes took to weaving, or that the social status of the women who took to weaving were considered lowly by the society at that point of time.

The characteristics of the *eri, muga* and *pat* silk and their rearing methods have been elaborately described in British records. According to H.Z. Darrah's account, "*Eri* also called *endi* silk is obtained from a silkworm known as *Attaccus ricini*. The vernacular as well as the scientific name of the insect denotes its connection with the *era* or the castor plant which is its principal food plant. The *eri* is a multivoltine and produces 6 or 7 broods in a year. It is reared entirely indoors. The spun *eri* thread is devoid of luster but is soft to the touch and remarkably durable, qualities that make *eri* cloth particularly suitable for

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9 *Ibid. See also, P. C. Choudhury, The History of the Civilisation of the People of Assam to the Twelfth century A.D. (Guwahati, 1959)*

10 B.C. Allen, *Monograph on the Silk Cloths of Assam* (Shillong, April 1900) pp.166-180
rough wear. The *eri* silk is light but warm; the ordinary cold season wear of the Assamese villager was generally made of this cloth.\(^{11}\)

Rai Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur's account contain the following information on the *pat* and the *muga* silk.

The *pat* worm is a *Bombyx* and is akin to the common silkworm of Europe, China, Japan and Bengal. The *pat* worm feeds exclusively on the leaves of the mulberry tree. The cultivation of this crop was practically confined to a section of the *Katonis or Jugi* caste- the *polupohas*. Of the three varieties of silk grown in Assam the *pat* silk was the most valuable and only the well-to-do could afford to wear the *pat* cloth.

*Muga* silk is produced by an insect known to science as *Antheraea Assamea*. The silkworm is not known to be cultivated outside of Assam, a fact which gives relevance to its scientific name. The silk yielded by the *Muga* is of a golden yellow colour. The Muga insect is a polyvoltine and produces 5 broods in a year. The chief food plants of the worm are the *som* and the *halau* tree. The *muga* worm assumed two varieties when it was fed on the *champa* (*chapa*) and the *tetranthera polyantha* (*mezankuri adakuri*) plant. *Champa* silk is described as very fine white silk which used to be worn only by the Ahom kings and their

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\(^{11}\) See H.Z.Darrah., *Notes on some industries of Assam.* 1884-1895 pp.77-78. See also, E.Stack., *Notes on Some Industries of Assam, 1884-1885* (Shillong 1896)
nobles. Similarly the mezankuri silk as reported by Hamilton constituted the dress of the higher ranks, most of it being dyed with lac.\textsuperscript{12}

While History as well as tradition are silent as to the origin and date of the introduction of the culture of the eri and muga silk worms in the Assam valley, according to British sources, "both are very probably of indigenous origin, since neither of them is known to be cultivated outside the province or at any greater distance than the neighbouring district of Bengal. The Eri silkworm has never been found in the wild state, but a very near congener Attacus Cynthia occurs wild in Assam and may have been the progenitor of the domesticated eri."\textsuperscript{13}

The history of the pat silk also is uncertain. The cultivation of this silk was practically confined to a section of the Katoni or Jugi caste, the poluphoas. It is said that the ancestors of the jugis belonged to a priestly class, but having seceded from orthodoxy and denied the supremacy of the Brahmins, they incurred the displeasure of their king Ballal Sen of Bengal and his Brahmin advisors and were denounced by them as outcastes. All social intercourse with the jogis (or jugis as they were contemptuously called) was prohibited and they were compelled to flee Bengal. Some of them came to Assam with their knowledge of mulberry silk worm from Bengal. The evil reputation which the

\textsuperscript{12} Rai Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur., The silk industry of Assam, Agriculture B, Sept 1915, Nos,16-45, File A-25, pp.39-41

\textsuperscript{13} H.Z.,Darrah., op.cit., pp.77-78
jugis had acquired in Bengal followed them to Assam and attached also to the occupation of pat rearing by which they lived and Pat rearing continued to be regarded with contempt by the rest of the population. 

One can here refer back to the earlier mentioned popular Assamese legend regarding the origin of silk weaving.

With the coming of the Ahoms we get a clearer picture of the importance of silk manufacturing among the Assamese rural folk and the role of women in it. The Ahoms made their appearance in North East Assam in 1228 A.D. and gradually extended their domain over different parts of Assam. Under the Ahoms, manufacturing of silk cloth was extended to all sections including those of the upper castes in the valley. Queen Sarveswari, the wife of Siva Simha (1714-44) is said to have greatly encouraged spinning and weaving by the ladies, and also imported designs and patterns from other parts of India. The Ahom Kings established a Department of Weaving and maintained skilled weavers to supply the royal wardrobe with clothes. The weavers received rent-free lands and other favours in return for their services. Elaborate arrangements were made for keeping in the Royal store sufficient quantity of cloths of different varieties for presentation to foreign courts and dignitaries. Although spinning and weaving were kept out of the khel system nevertheless it appears that the

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14 Rai Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur., op.cit. p.4
15 S.K. Bhuyan., Studies in the History of Assam, (New Delhi, 1985) p.70
17 Edward Gait., History of Assam., (Calcutta 1933), p.271
state sought to establish some regulation on this economic activity also. An interesting fact that emerges from the records is that Momai Tamuli Borboruah, a minister of the Ahom monarch, Raja Pratap Singha (1603-1614) made it compulsory for every able bodied adult male to make a bamboo basket and every able bodied female to spin a certain quantity of cloth every evening. It is perhaps from this point that weaving among the Assamese became a part of women's ordinary household duties. No woman was considered accomplished unless she had attained proficiency in weaving. When a proposal of marriage was made, the first question asked related to the bride's proficiency in bowa-kata, i.e. whether she is skilled in spinning and weaving.¹⁸ This, then also perhaps was the starting point of the creation of a myth of a woman's natural skill. Female labour thus given a compulsory character was advantageous in many ways. On the one hand it helped households to fulfill their cloth requirement and also fulfill the state demand and on the other hand it helped to keep in the Royal Store a sufficient quantity of cloths of different varieties for presentation to foreign courts and dignitaries.

The encouragement given to spinning and weaving resulted in the concentration of silk production centers. In Medieval biographies of Vaishnavite preachers, one comes across certain areas or villages known for producing silk. Budha Ata, one of the foremost disciples of Madhabdeva hailed from Tantikuchi

¹⁸ B.K. Baruah, op. cit., p.105
where silk cloths were produced. Ananta Kandali, one of the junior contemporaries of Sankardeva, in his autobiographical reference to his ancestry gives an interesting description of the locality in which silk was produced in abundance. He refers to Hajo which probably included Sualkuchi as well\(^\text{19}\). Medieval records viz, the \textit{Guru Charit Katha} mentions almost every women in connection with spinning and weaving. It is interesting to note that sometimes even handicapped women too busied themselves in spinning and weaving. The family loom was so essential that if any family somehow did not have its own loom it used to borrow one from others even on share-clothing basis or by selling or mortgaging gold or valuable ornaments- in both cases the women of the family taking the initiative. It is recorded that in times of need some families could supply as much clothes as the situation demanded. For example Ai Dayal Hari prasha, wife of one Hazara Atai could provide at a time 80 \textit{bhakats} (disciples of Shankardeva) each with two pieces of cloth. This shows how a society depended on women in the loom for its entire clothing needs. The medieval records, viz, the \textit{guru charit katha} mention that the daily life of the women started with rising from bed in the morning and taking bath in the river, washing clothes, husking and boiling rice, cooking food, weaving cloth, taking care of children etc. The domestic cloth requirement was entirely met by women. Almost every woman referred to in the work is mentioned in connection

with weaving and spinning indicating clearly that it was they who had the responsibility of supplying the household with necessary clothing.\textsuperscript{20}

Thus women were an indispensible partner of men in the socio-economic processes of the period. Despite this, contemporary sources contain hardly any record of women taking part in socio-economic production and this despite volumes of records kept and preserved by the Ahom state (The buranjis) and biographical and genealogical records of medieval Assam. Once the skill became identified with women, it simply became part of her daily routine and ceased to be even valued economically or acknowledged as labour even though it was the women’s skill that helped sustain the industry throughout the Ahom period. Female weavers were awarded only a peripheral status. This is evidenced from the fact that, the state department of weaving was headed by men and King Naranarayan (1540-1587) appointed Sankardeva as the chief of the weaver’s guild, at Tantikuchi in Kamrup.\textsuperscript{21} Women seem to have been kept away from acquiring economic strength through participation in the production system. Training and engagement in weaving, for female silk weavers was part and parcel of the period of maintenance and general training before marriage expected of all girls.

\textsuperscript{20} Guru Charit Katha., as cited by Jahnabi Gogoi Nath., "Women and Work in Medieval Assam; Reflections from the Guru Charit Katha, in Manorama Sharma and David Syiemlieh (eds)., Proceedings of the North East India History Association.,(Guwahati, 2003) p.352
\textsuperscript{21} Quoted, in BK. Baruah., op.cit., p.108
It was this structure based on the exploitation of women's labour which laid the foundation for future hierarchical divisions in the industry.

The real test of the silk industry's resilience began with the entry of the British into Assam in the early 19th century. British traders had established commercial contact with Assam even before the East India Company assumed power in Bengal in 1757. Business documents show that traders from Bengal in the early years of the 18th century bought betel nut and tobacco. They received in exchange for their goods, silk, lac, mugadhotis, ivory and timber from Assam.\textsuperscript{22}

The East India Company did not take long to understand where its best interests lay. In 1786, it resolved to open trade with Assam. It was a sort of a calculated march on the part of the company, from commerce to political control of the situation which passed off at a dramatic speed. From the last quarter of the 18th century, the Ahom monarchy was tottering under the impact of a series of internecine power struggles. The crisis was all embracing. Ultimately it gave a chance to the East India Company an opportunity to interfere and project its image as the savior of the people of Assam from the Burmese inroads and the internal threat posed by the Moamariya rebellion. By 1826, the whole of Assam had passed into the hands of the East India Company\textsuperscript{23}.

\textsuperscript{22} Fort William India House Correspondence, (Public), Vol.1.(1748-1756) p.11

\textsuperscript{23} Rajen Sakia., Social and Economic History of Assam 1853-1921 (New Delhi, 2000)

For details on the British annexation of Assam, see also, S.K. Bhuyan., op.cit. and H.K. Barpujari., Assam in the Days of the Company, (Shillong, 1996)
Historical literature has little to say about what the change from native to foreign rule meant for rural women weavers and silk producers. Before the 19th century, Europeans usually dealt with silk traders in Assam, rather than the peasant producers of silk cocoon or raw silk and hence much of the works deal with the complicated technical aspects of silk weaving. Nonetheless even casual observation made by British administrators and a feminist scrutiny of the contemporary records reveal how important women’s labour was for the sustenance of the silk industry. For instance, “weaving” says Samman, ‘among the Assamese forms a part of a girl’s education and a part of a woman’s ordinary household duties. The women of the family are expected to make their own cloths and those of the men as well’. The weaving of cloth of every kind says Hannay, as well as, the process of dyeing is carried on exclusively by the female and all, engaged from the Gohain’s family to the poorest in the villages. B.C Allen notes, “An Assamese woman is a house keeper, weaver and cook as well as a wife, and in many cases a farm labourer as well, and parents and guardians do not always see why a young man should be given such a valuable helpmate”. This shows the crucial role played by women in the socio-economic process especially through their traditional handloom activity of silk processing and weaving.

25 Cited in *ibid.*, p.106
26 B.C Allen., *op.cit.*, p.104
The indispensability of women's labour is further evidenced by British records which contain details about the different stages of silk manufacture. The following account by Rai Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur, written in the early years of the 20th century, gives us a clear idea of the involvement of women in the craft. According to the report, the fibre of the silk cocoon was extracted either by reeling or by spinning. Reeling consists in drawing out the natural single filaments of a number of cocoons and uniting them into a single thread which was taken up and wound around a wooden roller which was made to revolve like a reel. The Assamese reeling apparatus known as the hal or bheer was a simple contrivance. Two women were apparently required for working the reeling apparatus, one to draw the silk from the cocoons, the other to wind it on the reel.

As soon as reeling was over, the wooden roller on which the silk was wound was detached from the reeling apparatus, and the thread was transferred with the help of a spinning wheel to natai or bamboo reel. The re-reeling was done as a rule by the woman herself and generally as soon as the reeling of the cocoons was over.
The spinning of silk was usually the task of the females. It was a very slow and tedious process and usually a woman, in addition to her household tasks could spin only 2 tolas (1kg: 85.73 tolas) of thread in a day.  

During the long history of silk production in Sualkuchi, rural women took part in all the four stages of silk production. While weaving was an almost exclusive preserve of females, it may be mentioned at this point that in Sualkuchi, it was not unusual to find both men and women weaving but this may be because under the Ahoms, silk weaving had become a specialized craft in Sualkuchi undertaken by professional weavers catering to the demands of the state. Early British records too point out that in some parts of the districts of Kamrup (which included Sualkuchi) and Darrang, professional weavers manufacture the silks but the chief manufacturers were women, that finer cloths were generally prepared by women of respectability and position.  

It is interesting to note that the manufacture of silk was purely domestic. There were no large filatures, nor was there any system of breeding the worms on a large scale. The weaver produced just enough for domestic consumption and disposed the thread at the village fair. There was no regular trade in silk

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yarns or fabrics, nor any stated market where they could be purchased in large quantities.\textsuperscript{29}

From the British records, thus it becomes clear that this industry was the most important cottage industry which kept the rural household going for whatever supplementary income it could earn during lean agricultural season.

Apart from noting the women’s role in silk manufacturing one also has to understand the kind of steps the British took to encourage the industry that was almost a life line of the rural Assamese people.

One of the first British officers to understand the economic potential of extension of sericultural and handloom operations in Assam was David Scott, the Governor General’s Agent on the North East Frontier. Scott noted that Assam was an agricultural not a manufacturing country and that there could be no great market for rice and such crops, Scott therefore argued forcefully that unless means were immediately adopted by the government to encourage the production of more costly articles of export such as raw silk and \textit{muga} in particular, it would become necessary either to reduce materially the amount of scanty revenue at present derived from the districts or to revert to the former system of compulsory labour. In 1831, Scott, introduced from Rangpur reelers, reels and plants of the \textit{Morus Alba} and established a factory at Darrang in upper Assam with the object of extending the cultivation of the \textit{pat} or mulberry-reared

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{W.W.Ward., Report on the Administration of Assam, 1880-1881}
silk worm and of improving the reeling of the muga silk worm. The practical results of the experiment were slight and nothing more was done to encourage sericulture in Darrang. Between 1834 and 1840, cocoons and thread of the muga worm with specimens of the woven cloth were submitted to the sub committee of the Agriculture and Horticulture society for approval but though the products were reported upon favourably, the silk trade does not seem to have in any way been stimulated and no attempt was made to invest capital in the industry for a long time. In 1873, a gentleman by the name of Mr. Lepper was commissioned by Messer’s Lister and Company to endeavour to introduce silk on a commercial basis in the district of Lakhimpur. Lepper found the climatic conditions to be exceptionally favourable, but the difficulty and expense of procuring the labour required was apparently so great that he was advised to abandon the enterprise and no attempts were since made to extend the industry in this district. Between 1868 and 1888 attempts were made by several tea planters and by Mr A.C. Campbell. D.C. Kamrup to rear the eri worm on a commercial scale but the results was disappointing and in 1887 lakhs of worms carried off entire crops. Since that time no attempt was made to practice sericulture on a commercial scale in Assam. Subsequent British efforts to put silk on the commercial map of the country failed.

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30 Nirodh K. Baruah, David Scott in North East India, (New Delhi 1970), pp.88-105

See also, The Assam and East Bengal Administrative Report, 1907-1908, pp.24-29

31 E. Stack, op.cit., p.4

32 Rajen Sakia, op.cit., p.68
In all these cases failure was said to be due to the spread of diseases amongst the worms, or the destruction of castor plants by caterpillars. During the late 19th century, entire crops and broods of worms fell prey to "flacherie" (denoting bacterial fermentation of undigested food) a deadly silk worm disease and pebrine. Pebrine first hit European silkworms during the mid 1840's and a soon spread to other silk regions whose governments tried to protect local production. The disease itself was not brought under control till the mid 1880's when hygienic methods developed by Pasteur and his associates were put to use by European silk worm rearers. By that time however European cocoon production had been almost halved. Sericulture in Europe survived only because of enormous annual imports of silkworm eggs from Japan. The Japanese Government intervened at various levels to protect and support and restructure its domestic silk production, setting up strict controls which enabled Japan to take advantage of the collapse of European sericulture and develop both a thriving export trade of silkworm eggs to Europe and a large export of silk yarn to the United States.

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33 See, A Pringle Jameson., (D.Sc.), Report on the Diseases of Silkworms in India, (New Delhi, Reprint, 1984) Although from the designation of the author, it is apparent that the report was filed by a British Officer, unfortunately the reference to the book does not indicate the year in which the Report was filed and only the re-printed version of the Report is available from the North Eastern Council Library, Shillong.

In Assam, the situation was very different. Not only was the opportunity to export silkworm eggs to Europe lost, but the Government looked on impassively when whole broods of silkworm was ravaged by disease.

It would be unreasonable, however to attach too much importance to the failure of the European attempts to cultivate the silkworm. It is difficult to believe that a plant that thrived in such luxuriance around the cottages of villagers could not be cultivated on a large scale when the proper method of treatment of disease had been ascertained. The real cause of failure in all these cases was the absence of expert knowledge on sericulture. The outbreak of disease amongst silkworms was not peculiar to Assam. With scientific culture of the worm, dangers from disease had been greatly reduced in Bengal and elsewhere and there is no reason why scientific sericulture should not have proved successful in Assam. Moreover as in the case of tea and other plantation work elsewhere, the British could have easily overcome the shortage of labour with migrant labour.

The Report on the industries of Assam, 1884-1885 noted that Assam cocoon growers (both eri and muga) were in a much better position to supply cocoons to the English silk-spinner than the principal tussar producing areas of

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35 See, observations made by G.N. Gupta(ICS) , Survey of Industries and Resources of Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1907-1908, p.24
36 also E. Z Darrah remarks about plant disease, op. cit.,p .78
37 Rajen Sakia., op.cit.,p.72

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Bengal. Some British officers, like the Imperial Silk Specialist, Maxwell Lefroy, noted that the silk sector, especially the *muga* industry is a considerable one, of peculiar character and concerned with a class of silk not known from any other area and that it was probably well worth making an effort to put the industry on a good footing and to develop it. Despite such positive recommendations, no attempt seems to have ever been made to develop the cultivation of *muga* for the English market. The *muga* silk worm was never biologically investigated by an entomologist. Interestingly, while advocating steps for the extension of *Muga* and *Eri* silk, "Lefroy squarely blamed the Assamese rearer for being "lazy and unenterprising, superstitious and unaware of hygienic practices to prevent disease among the silk worms." Even Indian officials seem to have pre-judged the native rearer even before introducing steps for improvement of sericulture. For instance, Rai Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur termed the Indian cultivator as conservative and un-enterprising. At this point, it would be worthwhile to note the rearing practices of the indigenous population. Rearing of silk worms was mostly carried out by the women folk. Men took a very minor part in the rearing of *Eri* and *Pat* worm which were reared indoors. Their chief function was to fetch castor and mulberry leaf from a distance when the home supply of leaf fell short. In the case of *muga*, which was reared outdoors at a distance from the rearers

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37 E.Stack., *op. cit.*, p.4
39 Rai Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur., *op. cit.*, p.54
home, men took a greater part in the rearing of the worm. All silk worms especially the *muga* and *pat* were regarded as sacred beings (*doyang bostu*) which was required to be handled with care and reverence and which must not be touched or even looked at by the rearers themselves. The rearer herself was not allowed to touch the worms till she had washed and put on a clean cloth. Rearers believed that a single touch of impure body was enough to finish the entire crop in a week. It is therefore difficult to accept the British argument that the rearer's lack of personal hygiene led to disease among the worms. The real reason was the lack of information on scientific methods of rearing the worms. The art of sericulture and weaving was a peculiar skill and every hand just could not be good enough. Traditions have it that personal cleanliness of the men or women who are supposed to rear *eri, muga* or *pat* worms is the secret of success. Such absolute cleanliness could not be expected from hired hands more so when their number became numerous. It may have been that as long as women supervised sericulture and rearing operations, under strict traditions of cleanliness, the worms survived; while British efforts to rear the worm on a commercial scale through hired help failed. Moreover as noted above, the British seem to have very easily given up their plans for commercialization of silk rearing operations because of the expenditure and effort involved in training the local population in rearing practices. The second equally likely reason could be that

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since sericulture operations were carried out by the women, plans for commercialization would have necessitated their involvement too and the colonial Government was either worried that, the “native” population which considered sericulture and weaving as household practices of the female folk, would resist this move or maybe, the administrators own conservatism prevented them from undertaking expansion schemes which would have required the skill, advise and participation of women.

Though records are silent on the impact of the ruin of crops on the rural producers, one can surmise that the supply of yarn to the weaver must have been disrupted thus causing them hardship. We do however have definitive evidence of the elimination of two varieties of silkworm due to the extension of the colonial rule in Assam. These were the two most expensive varieties of silk - the mezankuri and the champa - silk that was worn only by the Ahom kings and their nobles. By 1889, the Mezankuri variety of silk had also totally disappeared. One of the reasons for this falling off is that the new rules restricting clearances in the forests were unfavourable to the growth of the mezankuri tree. The tree sprang up spontaneously in abandoned clearances and it is in this early shrub - like stage that it is fit for the worms to feed on. In the second year the silk is hardly distinguishable from the common muga. Thus the mature tree was quite out the question and as the mezankuri was never cultivated, forests clearances were the only places where breeders could look for young worms. By 1881,
there does not seem to have been a single piece obtainable in Jorhat. The collapse of the Ahom monarchy saw the decline of the pat or mulberry silk as it was more largely in vogue under the native rule. After the annexation of Assam, pat was supplanted by the cheaper Tussar of Bengal. All the three varieties of silk mentioned above which were earlier, exclusively manufactured by the weavers of Sualkuchi, as traditional means of livelihood must have suffered a set back. How rural women coped with this crisis is of course open to debate. Not just the luxury varieties, even the daily wear of the Assamese of the rural folk, felt the impact of the British regime. Partly due to the influx of money into the province, the price of muga and eri silks rose four fold within fifty years that is, between 1826-1892 making it out of reach of many common people.

By 1907-08, the silk industry was again contending with unfavourable market conditions. Exporting shops in Kamrup and Calcutta were reported to be holding stock which they were not being able to dispose off. The East Bengal and Assam Administrative report of that year noted that reported that the condition of the silk weavers was depressed and much of the profit earned was being taken by the kyan Mahajans who advanced cocoons to the weavers. For 6 months of labour to spin and weave a than of endi cloth, the weaver earned only 5-6 rupees. The weavers in Sualkuchi were relatively fortunate. Here (maybe because it had a long tradition of silk weaving by professional weavers)

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41 Report on the Industries of Assam, 1884-85 p.21
the weavers were independent of the mahajans or middle men and bought their own cocoons and were able to sell their cloths at a much greater profit. However the entire export business was in the hands of the marwaris, who had no interest either in the welfare of the weavers, or in the introduction of any improvements in the weaving industry. The report further noted that the cultivation of pat had been practically given up in Assam and the fabrics which were supposed to be manufactured from pat began to be replaced by foreign yarn from China. According to some officials, the decay of the pat silk industry was due to the fact that the jugis or katonis who used to be the only caste engaged in the industry were giving it up, because they wished to rise in the social scale by giving up what was considered a degrading profession. But as Kanak Lal Baruah Bahadur argued, “people seldom give up a lucrative hereditary occupation for the sake of mere vanity. After all, it is the economic question that tells and if sericulture as an industry really pays, we can be sure that it will not be discarded for the sake of doubtful social advancement.” The real cause of the decadence of the pat silk industry is due to the import of cheap silk from Bengal and china. Added to this was the fact that cheap machine made cotton and silk clothes which were imported from China and Japan were increasingly challenging the sale of the more expensive muga and pat. By 1908, in fact, the

43 East Bengal and Assam Administrative Report., 1907-1908
44 Rai Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur, op.cit., p.23
45 Kanak Lal Baruah Bahadur., op.cit.,p.44
cultivation of both *muga* and *pat* had considerably declined. Government apathy is revealed in a letter posted by Colonel Keatinge to the Government of India in 1877 where he observed that "the question of extending the *pat* silk industry in Assam need not be seriously considered."^47^

Once again, the reasons for Government apathy towards silk extension in Assam seem to the result of a deep seated gender bias. Labour, even in the Western world then, was a male concept- it was something that men did for a wage. It was probably difficult for the British administrators to view Women's work in the silk industry as productive labour. The silk industry, because of its high concentration of females was thought of as a private affair and women's work there was viewed as something that was done in their leisure time and hence no special measures were deemed necessary by the Government to foster the industry or work out positive plans for its expansion.

At this point it is important to see whether this largely female dominated industry witnessed a noticeable shift in the number of women involved in this craft to any other handicraft or agriculture sector. The tables given in the next page reveal the workforce participation of women in three major sectors of the economy from 1911 down to 1931.

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^46^ See *East Bengal and Assam Administrative Report 1907-1908*. see also G.N. Gupta., *op.cit.*, p.27

^47^ *Report on the Industries of Assam, 1884-1895*
KAMRUP DISTRICT
OCCUPATION (OR MEANS OF LIVLIHOOD) CENSUS TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCCUPATION</th>
<th>1911</th>
<th>1921</th>
<th>1931</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SILK SPINNING AND WEAVING</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKERS IN SKIN LEATHER FURS AND FEATHERS</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKERS IN BRASS, COPPER, BELL METAL AND</td>
<td>938</td>
<td>887</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRECIOUS METALS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, Assam. 1911, 1921 and 1931
Note: (i) Figures are for workers who reported these occupations as their 'main' or principal occupation.
(ii) M=Males, F= Females
(iii) Figures for the third category of workers in 1931 are for workers in precious metals.

There is thus no evidence, general or particular, to say that women gave up their traditional activity of weaving and worm rearing and crowded into agriculture. What we witness in the silk industry is a consistent pattern of gender relations. There is no evidence to suggest that there was any major re-allocation of gender roles in this sector. Women by far outnumbered men in this sector—almost 1:9.

In other words despite unfavourable market forces and Government apathy, silk manufacturing remained a very important occupation for the Assamese women. From a feminist point of view, it is necessary to understand the conditions under which the rural producers survived even as international capitalism expanded.

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Before one delves into the issue, it would perhaps be more appropriate to fully understand the circumstances against which the rural women were holding on to their ancestral craft. For one, the lack of credit to the sericulturalists and weavers was a major bottleneck to the development of silk industry. The first of the co-operative societies was set up in 1917, largely through the efforts of an Indian Officer, Kanak Lal Baruah, Director Of Industries, Assam. But the co-operative movement was hardly a success. In fact Kanak Lal Baruah's Plea to allow him to set up more co-operative societies in Assam was rejected.48 Again, nothing in the administrative records consulted, tell us that the co-operative schemes were designed to advance loans and credit benefits to the women weaver, reelers or spinners to help them set up their own production units. The few people who were lucky to receive the British benevolence were some students of the Guwahati Weaving School, in the form of stipends. But the number of stipendiary students even as late as 1938 was only four. From the Report of the Department of Industries of that year, it is evident that students were male since these stipendiary students were admitted to the advanced course of the Institute and in that year no female students entered the advanced course.49

The colonial gender bias with regard to the silk industry is revealed in a very interesting report submitted to the Government of Assam in 1924. It says,

48 Kanak Lal Baruah Bahadur., op. cit:p.64
49 See Reports of the Industries Department,1938
The Bengal reeling apparatus introduced by the East India Company is

decidedly superior to the crude apparatus used in Assam for it could turn out
twice the quantity as the Assamese reel. But it must however be remembered
that in Bengal, the reelers are professional men who work for a wage, while in
Assam reeling, rearing and weaving is for the most part a domestic occupation in
which the workers are mostly women working during leisure hours. This
point takes on added significance when we remember that the reeling of yarn
was a very painful process which left the hands of the women rough and
calledoued. The report however did recommend the introduction of an improved
reeling machine in Sualkuchi as it would help the professional muga reelers. As
noted earlier, Sualkuchi was the only village in Assam where male weavers took
active part in weaving and hence the fact that the report recommends the
setting up of a reeling machine here, once again reveals that the colonial attitude
towards the silk industry was coloured by its gender bias—its perception that
steps for the improvement of silk manufacture should be taken only if male
labour was involved.

In 1918 a separate Department of Industries was created and certain
subjects were transferred from other Departments to the control of the
Department of Industries, the chief of them being the development of the
weaving industry, sericulture, and the compilation and collection of trade

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50 Rai, Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur., op.cit., p.77
51 Loc.cit.
statistics. Nonetheless the policies that the Department devised were far from robust enough to tackle the problems of the silk industry effectively. The British interest in the silk industry was usually restricted to a managerial point of view. The major issues that the Department sought to address, were, how to boost production, how to improve the quality of the silk, how to get potential producers to take up silk production, and how to prevent losses resulting from silkworm disease and other technical bottlenecks. For instance, the Report of the Department of Industries, 1920-1921, by way of its achievements in that year notes that "...pat seeds were distributed to rearers in Sibsagar and Nowgong districts, study of life history of the muga ..." was made. Again the Assam Administrative Report of 1926-1927, notes, “...5000 layings of disease free pat and 3000 layings were distributed.... and a considerable quantity of eri and muga seeds were sold both locally and outside the province." While these were important issues, they did not get translated into practical policies and in no way seems to have helped the women weavers and silk manufacturers.

In 1930, the Industries Department appointed a weaving master to demonstrate the working of the fly shuttle handloom. No appreciable result was however achieved specially in the Assam valley in many places of which even the existence of a weaving inspector was unknown. The first weaving inspector was a Bengali male who found it difficult to interact with the Assamese weavers most

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52 Report on the Administration of Assam 1919-1920., P.20
of whom were women. Moreover, no suitable arrangements were made to teach those women weavers who did not appear in public. While it was argued that steps should be taken to train a class of women instructors to work in conjunction with the male demonstrators, nothing much was done in this direction.\textsuperscript{55} It is interesting to note that while male students of the Government weaving institute at Guwahati who passed the annual examination, either went for further technical studies outside the province, or were in paid employment in Bengal and elsewhere, female students who passed in the annual examination were engaged in weaving in their own homes.\textsuperscript{56} For instance, the Report of the Industries Department of 1935-1936, notes " ..........Of the 13 students who passed the elementary course, 12 got themselves admitted to the advanced course and one has joined a cotton mill. Besides these, 7 girls passed the annual examination, of whom one died and the rest are doing weaving at home...".\textsuperscript{57} In other words, while the acquisition of improved technical skills by women did not fetch them paid jobs, perhaps due to lack of equal opportunities in the public space, the fact that they continued to weave in their home helped the industry to survive in the rural areas.

A part of the British policy was to engage Weaving parties in selected centers to popularize improved methods of weaving. The peripatetic

\textsuperscript{55} See, \textit{Report on the Department of Industries,} 1938-39
\textsuperscript{56} See, \textit{Reports on the Department of Industries for the years,} 1930-1939
\textsuperscript{57} See, \textit{Report on the Department of Industries,} 1936-1937. See also \textit{Report on the Department of Industries} 1940-1941, pp.12-13
Demonstration parties started work in the 1920's. Till 1926, there were three weaving parties at work but to meet the "growing demand of the public for demonstrations, a fourth party was sanctioned..." In Sualkuchi by 1938-1939, 1000 fly shuttle slays, 100 jacquards, 1 warping mill and large quantities of accessories were introduced. Even this limited activity was hampered by the lack of funds and an inadequate staff which could not pay proper attention in all matters even in this very important centre. The chief activities of the Department were crippled by the prevailing trade depression.

The Government's policy throughout the 1930's remained restricted to demonstration, encouragement and experimentation. Sericultural works were restricted to the production of improved seeds and demonstrations in different localities of the province among the village rearers.

A constant refrain of official records was the lack of funds for the Industries Department. As has been previously argued, perhaps a female dominated industry did not deserve too much attention in the eyes of the colonial masters. and its activities down to the 1940's remained confined to engaging peripatetic demonstration Parties to demonstrate improved methods

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58 Report on the Department of Industries, 1926-1927
59 S.L. Mehta, Report on the Industries of Assam, 1938-1939 p8-10; See also, Assam Administrative Report 1931-1932, p.27
60 See, Report of the Department of Industries, Assam for the year 1930-1931
61 Assam Administrative Report-1933-1934, p.25
62 See for instance, report of the Department of Industries, Assam, 1923-1924
of weaving in the villages of Palasbari, Sualkuchi and inspection of the Government Emporium and weaving institute at Guwahati.\footnote{See, \textit{Report of the Department of Industries, Assam} for the year, 1938-1939}

On the whole thus, this period was one of discussion and orientation rather than purposeful Government action. The Government saw its own role as restricted to demonstration of improved methods of weaving through peripatetic weaving parties, encouragement and experimentation. There was no change in the Policy of the Department outlined in the early 20th century and the activities of the Department were still confined to the encouragement of the two main cottage industries of the province, viz handloom weaving and sericulture and to the control of technical and industrial education.\footnote{See, \textit{Report of the department of industries} 1924-1925., p. 23 and \textit{Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, for} 1925-26., p.1} Well into the 1940's, while authorities maintained that handloom weaving is the most important cottage industry of the province, did nothing to augment this industry. The Department continued to maintain two regular schools for imparting training to a number of students annually with a view to turn out some practical weavers in addition to four peripatetic weaving parties for propaganda and demonstration for the improvement of the industry. There were also two parties for giving practical demonstrations and imparting instruction in dyeing and printing.\footnote{\textit{Report of the Department of Industries, Assam}, 1940-1941}
The above overview has shown that the colonial State largely neglected the female dominated silk industry of Assam despite occasional episodes of bureaucratic favour. The Government of Assam began to show some interest in the silk industry in the mid 1880s but it never contemplated an integrated policy let alone a state-controlled leap forward on Japanese lines. Low profile state support through the weaving demonstrations etc had no marked impact on the silk industry. Assam’s silk policy was inadequate: it was far from consistent and lacked a clear plan. The Government’s main instrument of policy, The Industries Department, remained weak, isolated and ineffectual. This resulted from it being starved of funds, personnel and planning—all indications of lack of top level support.

The positive recommendations of British officers and extension staff (that was entrusted with educating the rearers and reelers in modern technologies) had very little influence in matters of policy. Even the practical knowledge and advise of British Indian Officers were not taken into account as is evident from the fact mentioned earlier that Kanak Lal Baruah Bahadur’s plea to establish more co-operative societies for the weavers was rejected. In fact the co-operative support to the weavers throughout Assam, especially Kamrup was totally inadequate as is evident from observations made by the Assam Provincial Banking enquiry committee between 1929-1930.  

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[108]
In 1915 the Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, referring to the proceedings of the Assam Industries Conference held the previous year, recommended that eri and muga silk were indigenous to Assam and hence the Government should “...concentrate our attention on the improvement of the silk industry in the province, in particular the improvement of the ....... spinning, reeling and weaving of the muga and the eri silk...”. But throughout our period of discussion, as we have noted, positive recommendations for the regeneration of the silk industry in Assam did not find favour with the Government. Even as late as 1942, schemes submitted by Babu Sushil kumar Deb regarding the regeneration of the silk industry in Assam was not approved.

All silk development programs suffered from a marked gender bias. The fact that British records note the visible female involvement in the silk industry means that Policy makers were aware of the fact that female labour was the backbone of silk production. Nonetheless development efforts were not directed towards the women. Silk extension workers were male. The Guwahati Weaving School which was set up in 1920, with the aim to imparting weaving skills to the local population, was composed of male faculty. The Head Teacher and the Assistant teacher were almost always all male and provisions were made from

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67 Letter from the Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, to the Second Secretary, Chief Commissioner of Assam, Letterno.560-rev,20th/21/October 1915
68 Industry, B. file No lin of 1942. Apparently this gentleman was a prominent person of Assam. Unfortunately this file has been destroyed and only the reference to the contents of the file remains which can be accessed in the Assam State Archives, Guwahati.
time to time for appointment of a 'weaving Master'. While in, 1926, it was decided to add a female weaving section to the Guwahati weaving Institute, the faculty continued to be male appointees. Interestingly, it appears from a letter sent by the Director of Industries to the Second Secretary, that the Guwahati weaving School was in dearth of qualified staff. In fact to quote from the letter, ".... Not a single candidate applied for the posts of Weaving Assistants...." and recommends that the pay of the teachers be raised to attract qualified candidates. From a feminist point of view it can be argued that since weaving was associated with the Assamese women's traditional skill, little wonder than, that the British could not get qualified teachers to run the school. But clearly, the British made no provision for reserving faculty positions for women to teach even in the female section. It was only as late as 1934 and again in 1941 that we come across an instance when a female instructress was appointed to the school. This point reveals the Colonial silk policy never came to grips with the fact that even in male-headed households, the silk manager was usually a woman. The British showed little inclination to invest in or modernize the vast bulk of traditional industries. However, despite lack of Government support and unfavourable market forces, the silk industry, though it

69 see for instance, Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, file 111-1-68m of 1913 and, Agri., B, May 1914, Nos 17-19
70 Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, 1926-27
71 Letter from Rai Bahadur Kanak Lal Barua, Director of Industries, Assam, to the Second Secretary, Government of Assam, Shillong, March, 1922. LSG Department, Industries Branch, May 1922, 14-15
did lose its vitality for some time, did not completely die out. In South Asia
industrial decline in the early colonial period is usually seen as a result of the
world wide re structuring of industries under emergent international capitalism.
Similarly a mature capitalist world economy is often held responsible for post
colonial troubles in re-industrializing the sub continent. There can be no doubt
that global forces impinge on local social processes but it is important also to
emphasize that they do so in historically specific ways. Clearly, a mechanical
application of grand theory concepts is not very helpful in understanding local
historical developments. While the entire Indian sub continent was reeling
under the phenomenon of de-industrialization, in Assam, although the use of silk
was largely superseded by imported cotton by 1908, the industry did not die out.
It survived. The tradition of producing cocoons and winding some silk and selling
it locally continued throughout the 20th century. It still formed an integral part of
the national dress of the Assamese. Capitalism never totally destroyed silk
production from its original regions.

Nupur Dasgupta in a study of the silk industry in the neighbouring
province of Bengal contends that it was the contributory labour of women that
helped the industry to survive through 300 years of challenge and crisis. This is
probably true of Assam as well. For the rural women in Assam, silk weaving was

73 William Van Schendel., op.cit., p.40
74 Rai Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur., op.cit., p.1
75 Nupur Dasgupta,“Continuing Gender Patterns. The case of Sericulture” in, The Journal of Indian
Association of Women’s Studies (New Delhi 2000).,p.40
not so much an industry, as a part of the tradition of every female in the Assam Valley. It is probable that because weaving, being almost a way of life of the women folk of Assam, this craft survived. As in the case of Bengal, the households in Assam were able to utilize Women's unpaid labour whenever required. They could always keep the silk industry going for whatever supplementary income the household could earn. This is also probably why the even the inroads of a mature capitalist economy could not dislodge silk from its traditional centre of production in Sualkuchi. Moreover even when men abandoned silk in favour of cheaper mill imported cotton cloth, women still continued to use home spun silk as an article of clothing. As the Assam and East Bengal Administrative Report of 1907-1908 noted, "All the higher classes females in the Assam Valley still dress themselves very largely in silk, and even the poor women always have one or two silk mekhalas for special occasions. Assamese mothers teach the art of weaving and embroidery to their daughters from a very tender age." The households could carry on these activities because their labour was exceptionally cheap as a result of the home based character of silk production.

76 East Bengal and Assam Administrative Report, 1907-1908. See also, G.N. Gupta(ICS), op.cit., p.24
77 Administration of Assam Valley Districts, 1899-1900
Thus the silk industry remained interlocked with the women’s labour relying on her spare time and unmarketable labour to form a crutch that could act as a spring-board for later industrialization. It remains to be seen whether the Government of Independent India in collaboration with the state Government recognized this crucial labour of women in the survival of the silk industry and worked out a policy that would help focus attention and priority on rural producers and manufacturers.

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